*Extracts from*

*“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)*

*T.S. Eliot*

* Key Terms:
* **The “Individual”**

🡪 Need to be conscious of when we praise a poet when “he least resembles anyone else.”

- “In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man.”

-However: If we approach a poet without looking for the “individual” or “unique” part of his work can be enjoyed, we can see how “the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.”

* **Does Tradition therefore simply refer to the handing down of the generation before?**

🡪 No, Tradition does not have to simply refer to following the generation that one succeeds. Tradition has “a much wider significance” and it “cannot be inherited” it must be “obtained by great labour.”

- The “great labour” possibly refers to how well-read the poet is. He is saying that in order to write with a feeling of “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer” and their home country, the poet must read everything they can.

-This is referred to as “the historical sense” in which a poet can feel the “presence” of the “past.”

- “This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.”

🡪 Side note: Think of G.K. Chesterton: “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.”

* **How does a new work of art impact the past?**

🡪 When a new work of art is created, it simultaneously affects all of the works that precede it.

🡪 “The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.”

* **What does he mean by “standards of the past”?**

🡪 He means that current works will be compared and measured by the past, just as the past will be measured by the present (see point before this).

🡪 how it fits with the past is a test of its value

🡪 but as “infallible judges” a work can never conform to the past or be completely independent of it

* **How should the writer relate to the past?**

🡪 Cannot simply choose a favourite era or a couple of favourite authors.

🡪 For literature is “not getting better” in the sense of a progressive trend of improvement. -“He must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind

which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind – is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.

🡪 “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”

\*\*\*”The different between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.”\*\*\*

* **Is the “great Labour” he argues actually achievable?**

🡪 Some accuse him of pedantry for subjecting that so much of the past needs to be read

🡪 But he says that too much learning “deadens or perverts poetic sensibility”

🡪 It still must be sweat for by many, but only so much that will not “encroach upon his necessary receptivity and necessary laziness.” In other words, It shouldn’t take up all the writers times, nor should they try to become like an encyclopaedia of knowledge.

*Extracts from*

*“Dante” (1929)*

*T.S. Eliot*

* Key Terms:
* **Introduction:**

🡪 Says the less you know about the author before you read his work, the better. Sometimes “accidentally” stumbling upon an author can be a great thing.

🡪 Interesting that he was “passionately fond of certain French poetry long before [he] could have translated two verses of it correctly.” But with Dante, he enjoyed even more so enjoyed reading its Italian without actually have every studied it.

* **Dante and Grammar**

🡪 Not telling students to postpone Italian grammar before reading Dante, but noting that there is an enjoyment from reading it without having been bogged down by too much of the languages system and history (speaking generally, but using Dante as an example because he thinks it is easier to implicitly learn (especially for Latin students).

🡪 Two extremes: One is that you *need* to understand the ins and outs of Italian to enjoy Dante; the Other, that it can be enjoyed without knowing the framework of Italian grammatical history at all. Eliot is trying to find the sweet spot in between the two.

🡪 Says Dante can communicate before it is understood. Meaning the reader can grasp a clear understanding of what is being said without intensely knowing much about the Italian language. He specifically sees Dante as being different from the understanding he achieved from other languages he was unskilled in.

🡪 He says he experienced the “objective poetic emotion” in Dante

🡪 He says Dante is the “most universal of poets in the modern languages;” this is not a statement about “greatness” or “comprehensiveness.” Dante is easy to read for modern languages because it is an “immediate product of universal latin.”

* **Localism and Language**

🡪 He sees Shakespeare and Racine as being local in that they have more of a specific influence to them.

* **Medieval Latin and Philosophy**

🡪 Evidence for how easy Latin can be read is seen in the way Medieval philosophical Latinists “concreated on what men of various races and lands could think together” whereas the philosophical writers of too divided by racial and national differences of thought.

🡪 Dante is first and foremost a European according to Eliot. He is devoid of the localism and you do not need to know the “Italian mind” in order to thoroughly enjoy his work. Its not so much the same with the French and German, according to Eliot, in which you have to have a stronger understanding of how they think.

* **Poetic vs Intellectual Lucidity**

🡪 Eliot discusses how many of the modern languages of today have intellectual lucidity – meaning they have beauty founded in association. Speaking one word is associated with a grouping of other words, and so on, creating a *local* self-consciousness to the language (which is why, according to Eliot, you need to understand the structure and culture of many languages in order to further enjoy those languages poets).

🡪 Dante has a poetic lucidity as *a European* Poet. The individualism associated with the cultures and their languages of other modern languages is not seen in Dante, according to Eliot.

🡪 Looking specifically at its allegorical features is important but interferes with the type of engagement Eliot is trying to look at. The poetic lucidity of style.

* **Dante and Europe**

🡪 He thinks also that Dante being apart of a less “fragmented” Europe was instrumental in his becoming of a European poet. This does not necessarily have to do with the political redrawing of Europe after War, but with the development of a nationalism.

🡪 “Dante’s advantages are not due to greater genius, but to the fact that we wrote when Europe was still more or less one. […] He not only thought in a way which every man of his culture in the whole of Europe then thought, but he employed a method which was common and commonly understood throughout Europe.”

🡪 This nationalism was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

* **Universalism**

🡪 Eliot makes a distinction between “easy to read” and universal.

🡪 For Shakespeare, Sophocles, and Dante are universal because they deal with material that is “universally human.” Of course, as mentioned, Shakespeare is still more local because they deal with things that are “universally human” in local ways

- Example is the lines from Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra. He talks about how it implements simile and metaphor to “expand” whereas Dante might to intensive and explain. Need a strong grip on English language to properly understand the first, according to Eliot

🡪 Dante is closer to being a “European” poet.

\*\*\*”I do not at all pretend that we appreciate everything, even in one single line of Dante, that a cultivated Italian can appreciate. But I do maintain that more is lost in translating Shakespeare into Italian than in translating Dante into English. How can a foreigner find words to convey in his own language just that combination of intelligibility and remoteness that we get in many phrases of Shakespeare?”\*\*\*

* **Gender**

🡪 Eliot seems to be taking about male perspectives. Note Greek and Latin were historically “for the boys” while modern languages such as French and German were “for the women” who could use those more practically.

* **Dante vs. English Poets**

🡪 Eliot is not saying that Dante is inherently a better poet, but that the English poets, from a larger European perspective, are more *inimitable*, meaning not everyone can understand them because of their connection to a local language; also, that they form their own uniqueness in English whereas Dante is part of a common language. This makes Dante a “safer” poet to study. Reading Dante, you, according to Eliot, can step outside of this localness and see something more accessible to the whole of Europe.

🡪 Also says that Goethe was too individual whereas Dante was representative of a language more outside of himself.

*Extracts from*

*“What is a Classic” (1945)*

*T.S. Eliot*

* Key Terms:
* **Introduction:**

🡪 “It did happen that the history of Rome was such, the character of the Latin language was such that at a certain moment a uniquely classical poet was possible” This character and history is not available to every language and society (based on resources and “limitations”)

🡪 The poet who marks this classic was Virgil

* **What is a Classic?**

🡪 “The classic must within its formal limitations, express the maximum possible of the whole range of feeling which represents the character of the people who speak that language. It will represent this at its best, and it will also have the widest appeal: among the people to which it belongs, it will find its response among all classes and conditions of men.”

* **What is a Universal Classic?**

🡪 Universality: “When a work of literature has beyond this comprehensiveness in relation to its own language an equal significance in relation to a number of foreign literatures”

🡪 “We may for instance speak justly enough of the poetry of Goethe as constituting a classic because of the place which it occupies in its own language and literature. Yet because of its partiality, of the impermanence of some of its content and the germanism of the sensibility, because Goethe appears to a foreign eye limited by his age, by his language, and by his culture, so that he is unrepresentative of the whole European

tradition and, like our own nineteenth-century authors, a little provincial, we cannot call him a universal classic.”

🡪 Goethe is a Universal Author meaning “he is an author with whose works every European ought to be acquainted”

🡪 But note there are NO classics in any modern language.

🡪 Virgil is the standard of the classic but that does not mean he is the greatest.

* **Why Virgil?**

🡪 Virgil’s Aeneas shows the transition from Greek to Rome and the assimilation of it into “Rome.” But for Europe, Rome then transitions into Europe and assimilates into “Europe”

🡪 “The Roman Empire and the Latin language were not any empire and any language, but an empire and a language with a unique destiny in relation to ourselves, and the poet in whom that Empire and that language came to consciousness and expression is a poet of unique destiny.”

🡪 Virgil is writing at the perfect moment in time according to Eliot. Virgil is building off those before him, writing off the tradition before him.

🡪 Virgil provides us with a critical criterion – “while our literature as a whole may contain everything, every single work in it may be defective in something. Can use Virgil as a criterion for a standard to judge off of

🡪 Without this criterion, we become provincial

* **What does Eliot mean by Provincial?**

🡪 More than just wanting the culture of the capital or narrowness in thought, culture, and creed.

🡪 Refers to “a distortion of values, the exclusion of some, the exaggeration of others, which springs not from lack of geographical perambulation, but from applying standards acquired within a limited area to the whole of human experience.

🡪 Conflating “the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent.”

🡪 A provincialism of “Time” 🡪 when history serves it turn, and then is scrapped for a new which “the dead hold no share.” Provincialism is the languages that do not look the past (that being, the Latin past).

🡪 Thinking of American Revolution. Eliot is again revolting against his Americanness. Saying U.S. has forgotten its past and is trying to live separately.

🡪 We are all provincial together in using English as lingua franca instead of Latin. Those who would use Latin as Lingua Franca can only exist as hermits.

🡪 Everything outside of Latin is “Teutonic roots and husks.” It is provincial. This includes German which is why he is so critical of Goethe.

🡪 Eliot is asking how we can be less Provincial in terms of literature. The answer is that “we need to remind ourselves that, as Europe is a whole […] so European literature is a whole, the several members of cannot flourish, if the same blood-stream does not circulate throughout the whole body. The blood-stream of European literature is Latin and Greek”

🡪 to languages are interconnected because through Rome our parentage in Green must be traced.

🡪 Latin acts as the language of Europe. Roman Empire conquering almost all of Europe. But what does that mean if you weren’t conquered by Rome, what then is their connection to Europe or Latin? How universal is that actually? Note: this doesn’t even include the rest of the world.

**Questions – T.S. Eliot, Extracts from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” ; “Dante” ; and “What is a Classic?”**

1. Eliot’s “tradition” can only be obtained “by great labour”, yet Eliot also defends himself against accusations of “pedantry” (‘Tradition’). How persuasive do you find these arguments?
2. Eliot’s states that “poetry can communicate before it is understood” (‘Dante’)? What are the conditions under which poetry in an unfamiliar modern language can communicate? Eliot argues that “Dante easier for a foreigner” than Shakespeare, and that “we can come nearer to understanding [Dante] than a foreigner can come to understanding [Shakespeare or Molière or Sophocles]”. What type of ‘foreigner’ does he have in mind? As most of you will be ‘foreign’ to Italian literature, do you feel included among the ‘foreign’ readers whom Eliot discusses?
3. Why does he exclude the classics from that type of experience? “I admit that such experience, solidified into a maxim, would be very difficult to apply in the study of Latin and Greek. But with authors of one’s own speech, and even with some of those of other modern languages, the procedure is possible.” (‘Dante’)
4. What explains Eliot’s reluctance to call certain writers, even those he praises most like Dante or Virgil, ‘greater’ than others?
5. How is ‘provincialism’ defined by Eliot? Is his definition of provincialism the same as Kundera’s? Why does Eliot call Goethe ‘provincial’ (‘What is a Classic?’)?
6. Was Eliot right in arguing that there is a provincialism of time as well as a provincialism of place, and that “we can all, all the peoples on the globe, be provincials together” (‘What is a Classic?’)? Is this a prescient critique of contemporary ‘global’ culture, or a reactionary complaint?
7. No modern language could aspire to the universality of Latin, even though it came to be spoken by millions more than ever spoke Latin, and even though it came to be the universal means of communication between peoples of all tongues and all cultures” (‘What is a Classic?’). What is specific and unique about the ‘universality’ of Latin according to Eliot? Is his argument that no modern language can share Latin’s universality (still) persuasive?
8. How do Eliot’s arguments about the importance of Latin and Greek (“the bloodstream of European literature”) compare with those put forward in recent debates about the place of Latin and Greek in school curricula and the (ir)relevance or ideological bias of classics? Do his writings help perpetuate a view of “‘classics’ as a fairytale Western origin story”? ( https://www.chronicle.com/article/if-classics-doesnt-change-let-it-burn?cid2=gen\_login\_refresh&cid=gen\_sign\_in ) For other interventions in those debates, see e.g.: https://www.the-tls.co.uk/does-latin-have-a-future/ (Mary Beard) http://donaldclarkplanb.blogspot.com/2011/02/10-reasons-not-to-learn-latin.html (Donald Clark) <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/05/02/waarom-is-grieks-nog-relevant--bart-de-wever-en-co/> Demulder, Bram. ‘Gooi rosa, rosa, rosam niet in de prullenmand’ De Standaard; 2013; Vol. 90; p. 45 (available through LIMO)